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RUEKJCS/Joint STAFF WASHINGTON DC IMMEDIATE

RHHMUNA/CDRUSPACOM HONOLULU HI IMMEDIATE

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MANILA 001962

SIPDIS

STATE FOR EAP/MTS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 08/19/2018

TAGS: PREL ASEC MARR MCAP PTER RP

SUBJECT: NEW CLASHES IN MINDANAO, ARMY REACTS QUICKLY BUT WITH RESTRAINT

REF: A. MANILA 1920 (ARMED FORCES CHIEF DISCUSSES

MINDANAO CLASHES

1B. PEACE PROCESS WITH AMBASSADOR)

1C. MANILA 1860 (ALL DETERMINED TO MOVE PEACE PROCESS FORWARD AFTER SUPREME COURT DELAYS AGREEMENT)

Classified By: Ambassador Kristie A. Kenney,
for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (C) Summary: Just days after the Philippine armed forces drove insurgent Muslim fighters out of villages they had occupied in central Mindanao, fighting flared anew August 17-18 farther north on the troubled island as Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) forces attacked an Army convoy and several small municipalities in the normally quiet provinces of Lanao del Norte and Lanao del Sur. President Arroyo condemned as "treacherous" the attacks that left at least seven Philippine soldiers and over a dozen civilians dead. She vowed to "crush" the attackers, who she said were trying to disrupt "aspirations for peace." The Philippine Armed Forces (AFP) mobilized rapidly to confront the MILF guerrillas in Lanao del Norte, and latest reports from U.S. military observers on Mindanao and the press indicate that the MILF forces had begun to pull out of occupied towns. AFP chief of staff General Alexander Yano said the military would respond quickly to these "criminal acts" but seek to avoid widening the conflict, as the peace process remained "the policy of the government." In a conversation with the Ambassador, General Yano requested a postponement of the annual high-level U.S.-Philippine military talks scheduled for August 19-21 in Hawaii so that he and his staff could deal with the situation. No U.S. Mission or military personnel were affected by the fighting. The Ambassador chaired a country team meeting to discuss the situation, and it was agreed that the current travel warning to exercise extreme caution in central Mindanao remains appropriate. End Summary.

UNEXPECTED ATTACKS

12. (C) The new MILF attacks on August 17 and 18 came as an unpleasant surprise to the government, following the conclusion of successful operations in central Mindanao last week by the army, which regained control of several villages seized by the MILF (ref A). However, events took a turn for the worse over the weekend with bombings and attacks on Army personnel and villages in different parts of Mindanao. On August 17, several small bombs exploded in the normally quiet city of Iligan and MILF rebels attacked an Army convoy, killing seven soldiers. The bombings in Iligan were particularly unusual as it is not typically a target of MILF activities. However, a government peace negotiator noted

that Iligan was the site of protests last week against the government's planned territorial agreement with the MILF, now stalled by a temporary restraining order as the Supreme Court considers its legality (ref B).

¶3. (C) Early on August 18, MILF forces attacked at least three villages farther north in Mindanao in the provinces of Lanao del Norte and Lanao del Sur, and small-scale fighting erupted farther south in General Santos city. The most deadly MILF attacks took place in the towns of Kauswagan and Kolambungan in Lanao del Norte, where the insurgents killed residents and ransacked local businesses. Early reports claimed that hostages were taken and that over a dozen civilians were killed, but the reports could not be verified. Government forces responded quickly to the attacks and as of late August 18, MILF forces were reported to already be in retreat from Kolambungan.

GOVERNMENT CONDEMNS ATTACKS

¶4. (C) President Arroyo condemned as "treacherous" the attacks that left at least seven Philippine soldiers and over a dozen civilians dead. She vowed to "crush" the attackers, whom she said were trying to disrupt "aspirations for peace."

AFP chief of staff General Alexander Yano said the military would respond quickly to these "criminal acts" but stated that government forces had no intention to broaden their activities against the insurgents, opting instead for a more surgical operation. The AFP response would be focused and calibrated, with the goal of apprehending the perpetrators and ending the attacks. In a press statement, Yano also

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noted that the military would not recommend the suspension of peace negotiations with the MILF, as the peace process remained "the policy of the government."

¶5. (C) The MILF attacks in Lanao del Sur and Lanao del Norte, while probably intended to harass rather than acquire new positions, were relatively well-coordinated. The MILF said in public statements that it did not condone the attacks, and indicated that it was out of contact with at least one of the key MILF military commanders reportedly responsible for the fighting.

REQUEST TO POSTPONE MILITARY TALKS IN HAWAII

¶6. (C) In light of this new insurgent activity, General Yano told the Ambassador August 18 that he would have to cancel his plans to attend annual Philippine-U.S. Mutual Defense Board/Security Engagement Board talks slated to be held August 20-21 in Hawaii. Yano said he would be heading to northern Mindanao on orders from President Arroyo.

NO UPDATE TO TRAVEL WARNING

¶7. (C) During a meeting with members of the country team August 18, the Ambassador and heads of sections agreed that the most recent travel warning for Mindanao, issued via a Warden Message on August 10, remained appropriate.

COMMENT

¶8. (C) It remains unclear whether these recent attacks represent the work of rogue MILF elements, as suggested by General Yano and a government peace negotiator, or are part of a gradual ramping up of military pressure by the MILF to force the government to move more rapidly on the stalled peace process. President Arroyo and General Yano used strong words to condemn the MILF actions, with Yano calling the actions "a virtual declaration of war," but both also cast the AFP response as carefully calibrated to stop the

"criminal acts" of elements of the MILF and suggested that the government remained committed to the peace process. Unfortunately, MILF leaders themselves remained largely silent, except for a mid-level spokesman who said the retreat of insurgents from Lanao del Norte was based on orders from MILF military leaders. Post will continue to monitor the situation carefully.

KENNEY